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ABSTRACT

High school and college writing assignments encourage students to avoid every sense of purposeful self-involvement by directing all their attention to the world or to others. Perhaps teachers need to be reminded that, unless they give students the opportunity and occasion to focus on instrumental relationships between the world, other people and themselves, teachers are taking away from their students the very sense of their own lives as humans. If teachers were to reverse assignment techniques, structuring them to "subjectify" everything, directing them to demonstrate the practical, truly self-directed purposefulness of scholastic inquiry and academic activity, then they might find that students' work would improve dramatically to the extent that they realize that they have a personal stake in doing the assignments and doing them well. This procedural and attitudinal shift is from teaching and learning the subject to teaching and learning "through" the subject. (Appendixes contain an argument for strategic integrative learning experiences, a typology of required integrative-learning core courses, and a discussion of these two schemata in terms of writing instruction.) (HTH)

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THE PROMISSORY POWER OF SELF-INTEREST

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"It is amazing how much so-called writing problems clear up when the student really cares. . . ."
(James Moffett: Teaching the Universe of Discourse)

We all know that language is the single most instrumentally effective tool we humans possess. Through the use of it, we discover other people, the external world, our own selves, the universe of discourse, and all the relations among them. To use language well (or poorly) is the best (or worst) means to achieve satisfying self-realization (or not). *INSTRUCTION IN THE USE OF LANGUAGE OUGHT TO BE AT THE CENTER OF ALL TEACHING STRATEGIES AND OF ALL LEARNING ACTIVITIES, NOT ONLY AS MEDIUM BUT ALSO AS METHOD.*

One advantage of teaching the basics of rhetoric as part of all subject-matter mastery is not simply that *students* learn more and learn it more easily and thoroughly; even better is the fact that *teachers* are thereby freed from the intellectual and psychological frustrations of having to live with the fact that students aren't learning what we believe and know they should. By helping students "learn how to learn" whatever it is they ought to learn, we make it easier on ourselves as we "teach ourselves how to teach" more effectively. In the process we may discover that we can really help our students to understand that learning can be as rewarding for them as teaching can be for us.

The basic problem that so many of our students demonstrate is not their not knowing *how* to express themselves; they do that quite facilely and quite

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volubly, if not neatly or precisely. But they do have difficulties in knowing *what* to express, most especially about themselves; after all, at their typical college age, they've really only just begun to experience the need to know themselves better. To have nothing truly significant to say is, in a very real sense, not to be fully alive. We all must use language to achieve the projects which we value, and we will use language to the *best* of our potential ability only when we know ourselves personally involved in the *outcome* of our use of language as an instrumentality of purpose. Writing, therefore, if it is to be good, must also be useful; and it will be good to the degree that it moves *away from* functioning as manipulation and *toward* operating as realization. Writing divorced from a situational context in which doing the writing accomplishes something useful or instrumental to the writer can only be a mechanical operation, not a convictional engagement with reality.

Of the five rhetorical uses of language--thinking, listening, speaking, reading, and writing--writing is the activity which is the most actively demanding and engaging. The traditional role of the language teacher has been to help students acquire and master the rhetorical skills (especially writing), while teachers in the other disciplines call upon those acquired skills (especially reading) to help students learn the other things that need to be taught. Now, however, language teachers as well as teachers in the other disciplines are beginning to look at writing (and reading) in new ways.

In high school and college writing assignments, whether in English courses or in other courses, too often most of the writing activities we assign have been structured by us teachers to be a means of merely objectifying the selfhood of our students. What I mean by that is simply that we encourage our students to *avoid* every sense of purposeful self-involvement by directing all attention to the world, to others, to others-in-the-

world, or to the world-in-others. We send signals and construct obligations that say authoritatively: "Forget yourself and concentrate on what's outside yourself. *You* aren't important; only the world and other people are worth your best attention." Perhaps we need to be reminded that, unless we give our students the opportunity and occasion to focus on the instrumental relationships between the world, other people, and *their own selves*, we are taking away (or at least withholding) from our students the very sense of their own lives as humans. Unless every discourse can be part of what Merleau-Ponty has called "a manifestation, a revelation of intimate being," a means further to consolidate the selfhood of each individual, our students' writing efforts can be guaranteed to remain dull, uninspired, disorganized, and devoid of significance. After all, what is gained from an objectification of the self, if in the act it is emptied of its life, its vital spirit, its subjective being-in-the-world-and-among-others? Has scientific inquiry and methodology so dehumanized all of us, perhaps even without our consciously realizing it, that only that which is "objectified" can have meaning or value? What if we were to reverse our techniques, structuring them to "subjectify" everything, directing them to demonstrating the practical, truly self-directed (i.e., directed toward the self) purposefulness of scholastic inquiry and academic activity? We might find that our students' work will improve dramatically (if not necessarily quickly), *to the extent that they see that they have a personal stake in doing the assignments and doing them well.*

Already, activities are being directed to using writing in two distinctive ways: first, *learning to write*--in specific ways for specific purposes in specific situations; and second, *writing to learn*--specific things in specific ways for specific reasons. To these two functions, we can profitably add a third: *writing to live*--that is, writing to help discover and apply the multiple connections between what they're *learning*--in every course, discipline, curriculum, activity, and experience--and how they now are, one

day will be, or every day ought to be, *living*. This third function of writing has the potential to become the primary means whereby we as teachers begin to evoke in students the dynamic principle of self-interest, by capitalizing on the transactional desire on the part of everyone to do something to achieve personal intentions, to arrive at successful, satisfying, and rewarding self-hood. As James Moffett puts it in Teaching the Universe of Discourse:

> The primary dimension of growth seems to be a movement from the center of the self outward. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the self enlarges, assimilating the world to itself and accommodating itself to the world.... The detailed forms which this movement takes are various and often paradoxical. In moving outward from himself, the [student] becomes more himself. The teacher's art is to move with this movement, a subtle act possible only if he shifts his gaze from the subject to the learner, for the subject is in the learner. (59)

If our students all too often come to us poorly equipped to think, listen, speak, read, or write effectively, and they also leave us all too little improved, we shall waste our time finding fault, placing blame, and tracing causes. Yet it may be that our students' all too typical behavior--caring little to nothing about grades, about coming to class, about paying attention, about completing assignments--may be telling us that, in the current state of education, *TEACHING, LEARNING, AND LIVING NO LONGER HAVE A MUTUALLY INSTRUMENTAL RELATIONSHIP*. Certainly it is true that most of our students, even the best of them, come to us with little more than the bare purpose of acquiring skills good for "earning a living," while we too frequently continue naïvely to believe that they are really discovering, with our help, the many means of "learning to live." While that larger lesson ought indeed to be *the* one that we and our students should be pursuing, it may be the very one that we as teachers and educators have most often failed to communicate, or to communicate well enough.

If we can find ways to demonstrate--not merely to state--that mastery

of language leads to mastery of self, and especially of self in the world, then our students may begin to see that mastering the basics is in their strongest self-interest. As academics and educators we already believe in the inherent value of rhetorical mastery. We appreciate and value rhetoric not only as a tool but as a thing beautiful in itself and for itself. But our students don't, and despite all our argumentative persuasiveness, they won't, simply because they can't, unless we make it possible for them to experience directly and personally the immediate gratification, reward, and satisfaction of using rhetoric to enhance themselves--not the rhetorical arts.

This purposeful capitalizing on the inherent self-interest of our students can be done, done well, and probably done rather easily; but we have to change our perspectives, to see things differently. One of the things demonstrated by the Beaver College Institute experience is that the probability of success in solving any problem is in direct proportion to the ability and the habit of adopting variant perspectives and approaches to the problem. We know the problem, and if we're willing to make some shifts, we may well begin to find some constructive solutions. We—teachers, students, and administrators alike--have nothing to lose and everything to gain. In fact, our own enlightened self-interest demands it.

Granted that we have created and elaborated a multiplicity of institutional, curricular, and course structures, educational activities, and learning experiences. But at times we seem to have assumed that it suffices merely to provide them, without going on to clarify and to exemplify their uses and their purposes. If we have done that--either individually or collectively or institutionally—then it is no wonder that students find most of their basic academic studies impractical and irrelevant to their own needs and purposes. That is why we must give fresh thought to the notion of student self-interest in relation to academic learning.

Lest you react negatively to the resonances of the phrase "self-interest," permit me to explain its implications by means of a concrete example. In the course of this institute, we were asked to read and comment upon a one-page essay, written by a college freshman, on the differences between high school and college (not an untypical writing assignment). The essay was in some ways poorly-written and in others well-written from the standpoints of grammar, form, and style. But in it the student did identify at least three ways in which college is much more difficult than high school, described each in some detail, and even gave appropriate examples and interesting illustrations. Now, one way of responding to that essay would be to offer specific and directional comments on how to improve the paper's organization, structure, thesis, evidence, logic, movement, sequence, argumentation, and so on. From the traditional stance of academic excellence, such comments definitely serve the useful purpose of improving the student's ability to write better, to communicate more effectively and more efficiently. This approach to teaching the principles and practices of rhetoric clearly serves both the short-term and long-term better interest of the learning student. But aside from *improving his skills* and perhaps *increasing his knowledge,* the student's *personal attitudes* remain untouched, for he is asked to perform primarily as a disinterestedly passive observer concerned with accuracy of observation, acuity of description, and clarity of expression--all virtues so far as they go. In this framework of teaching and learning, no immediate transformational self-interest is either evoked or expected or demanded; self-involvement is simply not at issue.

There is, however, a quite different way of responding to the information generated by the writer. That approach sets itself to use what the student has himself provided and communicated from his own experience, in order to move him *beyond* that context, by engaging his personal self-interest and self-involvement through encouraging him to draw inferences, to see, for

himself, significances about himself as a college student who will before too long have to make the transition to "real life." By asking him to reflect on the possible *reasons for* the increased difficulties experienced in college as compared to high school, by asking him to imagine whether the greater demands placed on him as a college student might have any real purposes or any special projected consequences, the student would be asked to *create, through further reflection, a sensible connection between his first observations and the whole complex of his living*. Typologically, this way of teacher commenting moves the student (a) away from merely recounting informational data and (b) toward examining himself *in relation to* that information; then the teacher's comments ask him to move (c) through his projections onto himself to (d) constructing implications and conclusions about others and the world beyond himself. Directing this kind of re-writing activity constitutes the dimension of "involved self-interest."

Arousing and engaging the student's personal interest, structuring his involvement as a-self-in-the-world-with-others, will transform him from reacting to acting, from playing-out the operational role of a neutrally passive observer to living-out the dynamic role of a rhetorically active participant. In this type of writing (and re-writing) activity, the triad of teaching · learning + living is completed: 1) a teacher-initiated task impels the student to engage in 2) a learner-created experience for 3) a living-centered purpose. In this dramatic rhetorical exercise, the symbolizing system (the act of writing) and the symbolized message (the written content) are joined to and integrated by the symbolizer-self (the human personality who does both things). In addition, the symbological trinity is incarnated in an artifact (the final document) which is both the record and the revelation of a dynamically evolved personal process, one that now has meaning not only *for the writer as creator*, but also *for the reader as participant*. Thus are the teacher's as well as the learner's activities

transformed from craft into art, simply by re-directing attention and emphasis away from the subject-matter (writing as a rhetorical skill) to the learner (writing as a conceptual act). The procedural and attitudinal shift is from "teaching and learning the subject" to "teaching and learning *through* the subject."

By devising teaching and learning activities directed toward real or conjectural living, we will help students slowly but surely begin to see highly personal rewards—not the external rewards of good grades, teacher esteem, peer status, or even worldly success--but the internal rewards of heightened awareness, deepened understanding, and broadened maturity, all the qualities that will benefit them both now and later, no matter what their career, profession, livelihood, or avocations. It does no good to complain of our students that all they want to do is "just get by" by doing the absolute minimum, if we do nothing practical or meaningful to persuade them that they have anything to gain by doing otherwise. If in our institutional, curricular, and course structures and strategies, whether by mere oversight or by deliberate *over-attention to operational rather than transformational goals,* we fail to recognize and to exploit the power of our students' enlightened self-involvement and self-interest, we will miss a motivation for learning that can have nearly magical effects when properly evoked and properly directed. Teaching, learning, and living can be dull, dry, and dreary; or they can be engaging, exciting, and energizing. As a colleague in the NEH Institute said about having spent a whole semester in college dissecting and studying a cadaver in biology class, "the difference between a dead cat and a live cat *just may be important*."

In the Appendix to this portion of the essay, I present a classification of the typical structures of academic curricula, categorizing them not according to traditional disciplines and subject-matters, but according to their functional modalities and to the kinds of effects they seek to produce (see

Schema II). That schema proposes *separating* rhetorical and operational functions, whether in individual disciplines or in individual courses, but maintains the requiring of basic and correlative studies in the two large curricular areas whose modalities and effects are so different. The schema further suggests in the final diagram that the two areas can be brought together, bridged, by the fairly simple device of curriculum-wide writing activities. But at the same time, the argument of this essay would insist that *all writing activities need to include a strong rhetorical component that is aimed at stimulating direct self-involvement*, through creating writing assignments that specifically help all our students discover something to say as a personal contribution to the reality of the world in which their principal goal is to declare themselves as truly significant entitites, as they try to create a special place for themselves as educated and civilized human beings living full, complete, successful, and satisfying lives.

In order to achieve the unity and integrity of teaching in relation to learning, and of both teaching and learning in relation to living, no better tool than writing is presently available to provide the immediate means whereby all our students experience at first hand the total relevance and significance of academic endeavors. To exploit the potential power that lies within the comprehensive instrumentality of writing, we must use it in at least three ways: *1) WRITING AS A MEANS OF SUBSTANTIVE THINKING* (e.g., learning about course content and methodology), *2) WRITING AS A MEANS OF ACHIEVING SELFHOOD* (e.g., reflecting on one's own ideas, attitudes, and actions), and *3) WRITING AS A MEANS OF CREATING GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE* (e.g., seeing individual symbological systems in terms of broader contexts of learning with implications for the whole of life).

As humans we possess the distinctive ability to have ourselves as the object of thought. We have the capacity to unite, in the act of reflection, self-as-thinking-subject and self-as-object-thought-about. Along with that,

we are able to step outside our own consciousness in order to adopt the consciousness of another, even of many others, and then *to return to ourselves as changed beings*. At its best, whether we normally teach rhetorically (using dynamic and dramatic experiences aimed at self-development) or whether we normally teach operationally (using abstractive and analytical experiments aimed at object-description), education ought to create and utilize the various means whereby for each of us the common inherent talent--that of expanding the mind so as to apprehend the real self that creates the meaning both of the world perceived and of the perceiving consciousness--gets developed, expanded, refined, and deepened. If as educators we can find effective ways *not merely to argue, but empirically to demonstrate as well*, that we have that to offer our students, we need have no worry that they would fail to serve their own best self-interest by doing their utmost under our guidance and our example.

A P P E N D I X

SCHEMA I

AN ARGUMENT FOR STRATEGIC INTEGRATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Axiom: more learning experiences that are active are better than few (and all that are passive).

Claim: some kinds of activities and experiences, however, are better than others: viz., those that are structured to be personally meaningful by engaging direct student self-interest and self-involvement.

Aims: TEACHING ⟶ LEARNING ⟶ LIVING:

Problem-solving foci: (essentially progressive from #1 through #8)

1) correlate phenomenal data +
2) determine significant relations +
3) detect problematic issues +
4) investigate proposed solutions +
5) discriminate strategic objectives +
6) elaborate projected consequences +
7) demonstrate comprehensive understandings +
8) evaluate long-range future implications.

Structures:

journal keeping

collaborative learning

drafting procedures

peer reviewing

teacher conferencing

SCHEMA II

TYPOLOGY OF REQUIRED INTEGRATIVE-LEARNING CORE COURSES

* HUMANISTIC SYSTEMS - phenomenological & *experiential* modalities:

(expressive, communicative, creative, or aesthetic)

Rhetorical Structures with Transformational Functions:

Basic: • Linguistic studies (English, foreign languages, speech: rhetoric)

Correlative: • Verbal mathematics

• Literature & Fine Arts

• General Philosophy (& Religion)

("rhetorical" = somebody-communicating-with-someone-about-something-in-order-to-be-or-to-become-something)

** SCIENTIFIC SYSTEMS - phenomenological & *experimental* modalities:

(historical, analytical, theoretical, critical, or structural)

Operational Structures with Instrumental Functions:

Basic: • Scientific studies (natural, physical, biological, social, psychological, philosophical)

Correlative: • Symbolic mathematics

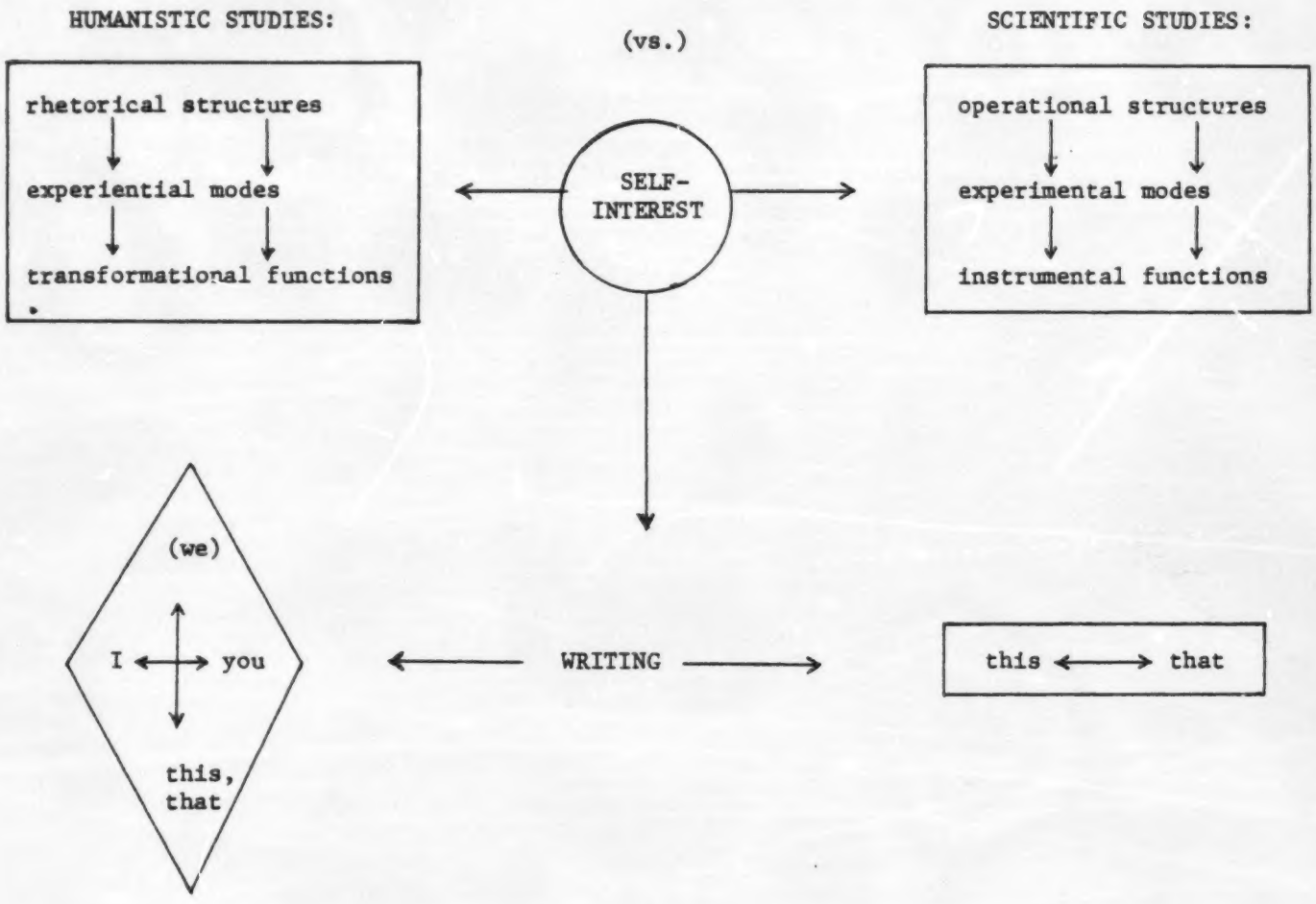
• Historical studies

• Social sciences

• Literature & Fine Arts

• Data processing & informational analysis

("operational" = something-investigated-about-something-in-order-to-explain-or-understand-something)


HUMANISTIC STUDIES:
(vs.)
SCIENTIFIC STUDIES:
rhetorical structures
experiential modes
transformational functions
SELF-INTEREST
operational structures
experimental modes
instrumental functions
(we)
I
you
this,
that
WRITING
this
that

A P P E N D I X

(see preceding schemata)

The structures of the required core curriculum have traditionally been divided roughly into two fundamental categories, with the arts and humanities on one side, and the sciences and mathematics on the other. Even though the division is an ancient one, some further thoughts may be paradigmatically useful here if we are to continue requiring all of our students to undertake studies in both areas. These schemata propose seeing the two parts of the curriculum in a new way, not according to the traditional and contemporary subject-matters and comprehensive disciplines (usually brought together into academic "departments of instruction"), but according to how particular subjects or discrete parts of disciplines function in terms of modalities--that is, according to what they intend to (and do) accomplish within the whole process of forming educated human beings.

The oldest of the symbological systems, the group of humanistic studies, operate in the rhetorical dimension of the teaching + learning + living triad, because they center on *the experiential means and possibilities of vicarious as well as real self-transcendence*. By their focusing rhetorically on "somebody-communicating-with-someone-about-something-in-order-to-be-or-to-become-something," students are lead to explore the infinite range of human experience, encouraged to probe how far they might be able to go in *surpassing the experienced and imagined limits of their own being*. These studies commonly permit and require that the structures of the realities bounded by the given subject-matters or systems become integrated with the private emotional and intellectual structures of the student's own life. Their focus therefore can be on humanizing or civilizing the student by bringing his own thoughts and behaviors more into alignment with *the most ideal images of ourselves as autonomous human beings*. In terms of the specific teaching disciplines

(schematized here as: language studies, verbal math, literature, fine arts, general philosophy, and religion), *EMPHASIS CENTERS ON THE EXPRESSIVE, CREATIVE, AESTHETIC, OR COMMUNICATIVE VALUES AND DIMENSIONS* of each subject-matter or course. If required basic and correlative studies in these areas are presented as little or nothing more than rules and formulations to be memorized and manipulated, students will be unable to discover a self-interested motivation or desire to make the insights and standards a part of their own personal lives. Therefore no real humanizing can or will ever take place (except perhaps for our most natively talented students). But if studies in these areas are presented *and exemplified* as dynamic and dramatic devices to help us each discover who we are and become what we each are capable of being or becoming, then they will be subjects that students will value and do well in. That is the true *humanistic dimension of experience* that must be deliberately taught, learned, and applied to living if students are to be genuinely engaged by their academic studies in these areas.

The newest of the symbological systems, the group of scientific studies, function in the operational dimension of teaching, learning, and living, because they center on *the experimental techniques and methodologies of instrumental analysis*. By their focusing abstractively on "something-investigated-about-something-in-order-to-understand-or-to-explain-something," students are taught to realize the finite range of human experience, discovering how far they cannot go in *striving to surpass the physical, biological, social, psychological, and philosophical limits of their own real or projected being*. Because these scientific studies normally permit and require that the students adjust and adapt their own emotional and intellectual structures to the external and objective dimensions of the largely extra-human realities that these subject-matters and courses encompass, the role of the private human personality is almost always minimized, except insofar as the individual come to understand the necessity of bringing his thoughts and behaviors

more into alignment with *the most real facts about ourselves as limited human creatures*. In terms of the specific teaching disciplines (schematized here as: science, symbolic math, history, social science, psychology, literature, fine arts, and data processing and informational analysis), *EMPHASIS CENTERS PRIMARILY ON THE HISTORICAL, ANALYTICAL, THEORETICAL, CRITICAL, OR STRUCTURAL VALUES AND DIMENSIONS* of each subject-matter or course. If required studies in these areas are presented as little or nothing more than artificial manipulations of descriptive data systems, students can hardly be expected to find a self-interested desire or motivation to act sensibly under the realization that our human nature can operate successfully only within the requirements and restrictions of real possibilities. But if studies in these areas are presented *and exemplified* as necessary and highly useful devices to help us grasp the significances of what is outside ourselves, so that those significances can function instrumentally in conjunction with the practical human choices and strivings of our whole life, then these will be subjects that students will value and do well in. That is the true *scientific dimension of experience* that must be deliberately taught, learned, and applied to living if students are to be genuinely engaged by their academic studies in these areas.

Within the humanistic domain, we need to require our students to engage in and be engaged by *as many as practicable of the rhetorical systems of symbological representation,* so that they do in fact become more fully aware of the *transformational potentialities* open to them--along with insights into certain kinds of self-realization that can only hamper or harm them.

Within the scientific domain, we need to require our students to engage in and be engaged by *as many as needful of the instrumental systems of symbological representation,* so that they will in fact come to understand the operation of limitations not yet susceptible to being overcome by human

intervention--along with insights into certain kinds of self-realization that only damage or destroy the very conditions that permit human life to find fulfillment.

ENVOI: When our students come to us, nearly all of them *believe* (or "feel," to use their favorite term) that they can do anything they set their minds to. As the result of studying with us, they must go away *knowing* that they can do both *much more* than they ever before had need to desire, and yet *far less* than they had any reason to expect. Those are the important lessons to have been taught, learned, and lived by--the personally meaningful realizations to have been exposed and sensitized to. For without those realizations ("ideas made real"), the very notion of what it means to be fully human can only lie dormant and impotent. If from now on and into the future we fail to do what we ought, to effect what we espouse, we will fail to serve our own communal and fraternal self-interest. Whether we like to recognize it or not, on the state of education hangs the future of our national and international integrity, and of our physical, mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual resources for us all, both as private individuals and as a planetary race.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

Although the thoughts expounded in and appended to this essay are all idiosyncratically structured, their sources derive from attendance at the NEH Summer Institute on Writing Across the Curriculum (Elaine Maimon, Director; Beaver College, 1982). Special thanks is hereby extended to my staff advisor, Finbarr O'Connor, Philosophy, Beaver College. Both firm support and gentle ribbing were provided by the other Institute participants; and special tolerance was extended by Dorothy Grimes and Martha Wall, the other members of the University of Montevallo team.

Reading James Kinneavy's reflections in Chapter 6 of his A Theory of Discourse (1971) promoted the courage to indulge myself in this particular kind of expressive discourse; he is not, however, to be blamed for the results!